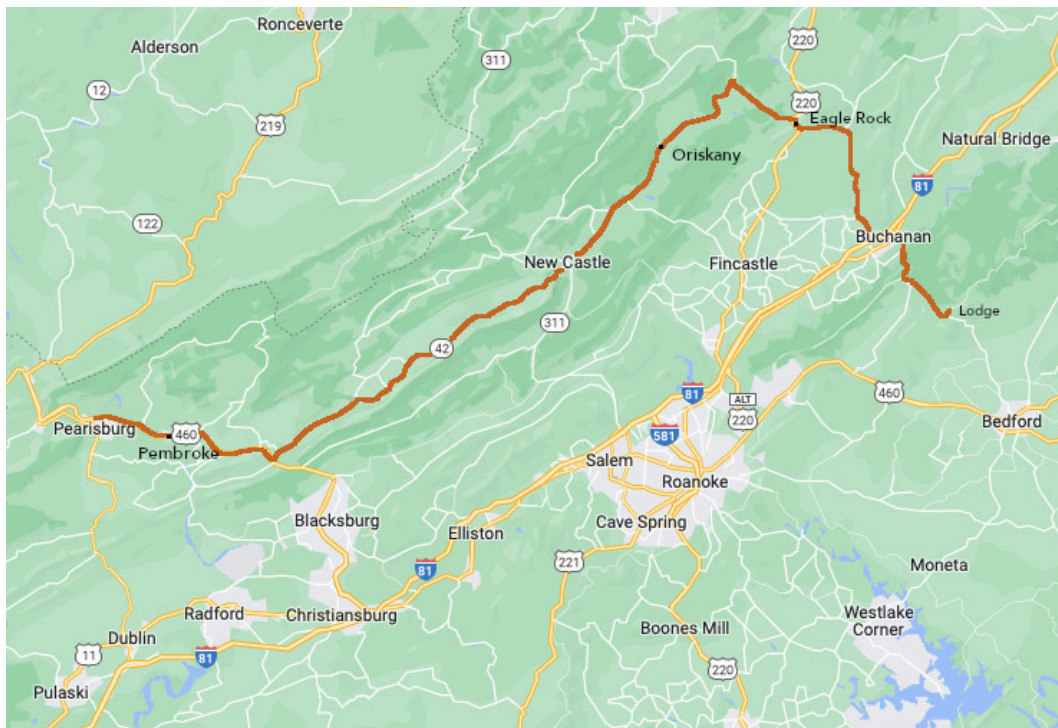


4 – VIRGINIA AND NORTH CAROLINA



Monday, 15 May

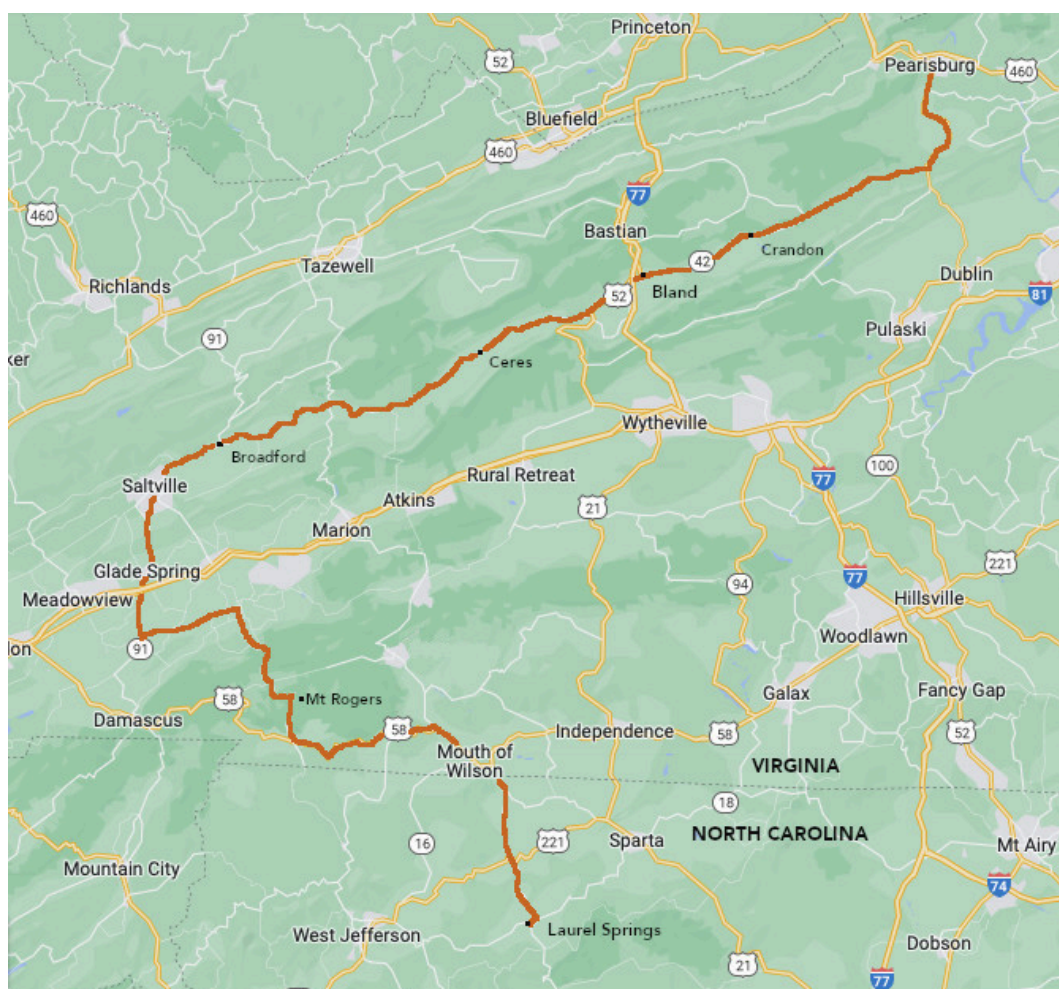
A dry, though dull and cool morning; I woke at about half past seven. Despite the fact that the dining hall was very empty and there was no buffet, we had a good and filling breakfast. Afterwards we packed our bags, checked out, and left at about ten o'clock.

From the hotel we drove back to Buchanan, then continued along Route 43, passing through some delightful countryside. We were soon rewarded with a fine vista of wooded mountains, valleys, forests, fields, and country houses. We stopped briefly at Eagle Rock to stretch our legs. Here a couple of very long goods trains passed by, blowing their whistles and causing three dogs nearby to howl and bark. Then, after a little confusion, we drove to Route 615 and eventually swung south-westwards, winding through forests where we could see mountains beyond. Just before Oriskany, we stopped and clambered along a looped trail that had us crossing and recrossing a stream at least fifteen times. Balancing unsteadily on rocks in my usual way, Colm had to help me across. Although it was a long and tiring tramp, it was good to get out of the car.

We then resumed our journey and finally reached New Castle, where we stopped for gasoline and then a late lunch of soup and sandwiches. We then continued along Route 42, travelling through more delightful countryside, though now with a fine view of the Appalachian mountains before us. The sun came out and it quickly turned warm. As I was becoming sleepy by this stage, I stopped the car at a layby and we rested for nearly an hour.

Refreshed, we continued our journey and turned on to Route 460, a bigger and busier road, which brought us to Pembroke and Pearisburg, where we finally found accommodation. There were very few motels in the area; the one that we found on the outskirts of the town was quite run down. Only one room was available and it contained just one double bed. However, as it would only cost us \$45, we did not quibble. Although very basic, we discovered that we actually had a suite of two rooms with a sofa in the second one. As Colm volunteered to sleep on the sofa, I fetched some more bedding for him.

We then went off in search of a restaurant and found a Pizza Hut, where we demolished slices of pizza and some fruit. Although it had turned rather cool, we took a quick walk before returning to our basic accommodation.



Tuesday, 16 May

We managed to sleep well, despite the coolness of the room and the various noises that could be heard during the night. I woke at 6.45 and had a shower. At eight o'clock we went to a restaurant next door, where we had a fast-food breakfast of eggs, bacon and a bun followed by pancakes, all washed down with orange juice and tea. We set off in the car shortly after 8.30 – one of our earliest starts, perhaps – and drove along the southern section of Route 100.

At Poplar Hill we turned on to Route 42 and, travelling south-westwards through the gently rolling Appalachian countryside, finally reached the little village of Crandon. Here we searched for a section of the famous Appalachian trail, but could not find it. We knocked on the door of a house nearby and an elderly man told us to

take a turn to the right. We followed his instructions and Colm finally managed to find the start of the trail, even though it was not signposted. Fortunately there was a layby where we could park the car.



Along the Appalachian Trail near Crandon, Virginia

For three quarters of an hour we walked along a soft, easy path, ascending gradually through pleasant though rather unremarkable forest. We eventually reached an ugly electric pylon and were able to enjoy a fine view of mountains on either side of where we were. We continued onwards a little farther and, when the path began to go downhill, we decided to turn back. By eleven o'clock we had arrived back at the car, delighted to have had a good walk.

Off we set again in the car and, driving through more pleasant scenery, we passed through Bland and crossed over the Interstate 77. We stopped after a while and had a snooze, for both of us were beginning to feel sleepy. Refreshed, we set off again and drove through Ceres and Broadford. We finally stopped at a little restaurant in Saltville, where we sat down to a cheap though filling lunch. It was served by a pleasant lady who spoke with such a strong southern drawl that we found her difficult to understand. It transpired that her mother was Irish. Indeed, if she had remained silent, we would have thought that she was an Irish lady. She was very friendly and informal, and was delighted to meet us. Confiding in us, she told

us how poor the local economy was, and that so many businesses had been forced to close. We had noticed quite a lot of dilapidated buildings in the region.

When we left Saltville, we drove southwards along Route 91, crossed the Interstate 81 and followed a very windy road down through the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area, which was densely forested. We passed White Top Mountain, continued on to Mouth of Wilson, then continued southwards into North Carolina. Following Routes 93 and 113, we dropped down to Blue Ridge Parkway, but stopped at a motel in Laurel Springs, just a few hundred feet from the Parkway. For \$55 we got a perfectly adequate room here that had a very clean en suite bathroom.

We rested for a while, then set off once again in the car along the Parkway, stopping to admire the fine view and to follow one of the trails for a couple of miles. It was very pleasant to walk again, having spent so long in the car, though it was quite cool by now.



Doughton Park Lodge, near Laurel Springs, North Carolina

After our invigorating walk, we drove on a few miles, passing some very dramatic scenery, until we reached Doughton Park Lodge, which we had intended to stay in. We decided to check the prices and went into the office of this small rustic hotel, which bore more of a resemblance to a motel. We spoke to a very pleasant lady who showed us around and booked us into a room for the following evening at \$87. The place looked nice and we were very impressed by it.

Later we drove to a nearby restaurant, where we had one of the best meals so far on our trip: I had beef and vegetable soup followed by river trout with a side salad, French beans, baked potato, rice and bread rolls (or scones as they were called here). I felt absolutely stuffed afterwards. On the way back we took another short walk to admire the view and watch the sunset. We finally arrived back at our motel, where I paid the bill and spent the rest of the evening in our room. It had been a good day.

Wednesday, 17 May

Despite loud snoring from the room beside us (the walls were very thin), we both slept well during the night and were up by seven. We left our humble lodgings

before eight, leaving the key in the room as there was nobody about, and set off in the bright morning sunshine for Doughton Park Lodge. The panoramic views of the misty mountains looked terrific at this early hour of the day. We stopped at the little restaurant and breakfasted on local cuisine: grits (a type of porridge made from corn, which I ate with butter and salt) followed by sweet potato pancakes, which I ate with bacon, then with some maple syrup. Colm ate his pancakes with rather salty country ham.

Fed and refreshed, we drove to the lodge, where we spoke with another very pleasant lady. We checked into our room, which turned out to be very comfortable.



Near Doughton Park Lodge, North Carolina

Once we had sorted ourselves out, we set off on a trek along one of the nearby trails. We found ourselves going downhill, which I realized was not a particularly good idea. Down and down we went through an endless forest. Although it had clouded over a little and it was cool, we soon heated up. By midday I had had enough. We sat down to rest and, after I had demolished a bar of Hershey's dark chocolate, which Colm had given me, then eaten an apple, I said goodbye and

began the slow and painful ascent. It soon tired me and I had to stop for frequent rests. It was obvious that Colm had far more stamina than I had. I was beginning to find these forest trails rather tedious; I would have preferred to walk in places where the going was easier and there was scenery to be enjoyed. However, the trail did offer some pleasant surprises: I could hear a woodpecker knocking on the trunk of a tree (although I could not see it), I noticed various unfamiliar-looking birds, I saw a huge cricket flying up to a tree, I nearly stepped on a large toad that looked like a stone, and I edged away from a large motionless snake that had black markings on its brown body.

By the time I had dragged myself up and out of the trail, then walked back to the restaurant, my legs were ready to drop off. At about half past two I sat down to a satisfying lunch of a club sandwich, made with rye bread and served with coleslaw. I joked with the lady at the desk when I left saying, like Arnie Schwarzenegger in the *Terminator* films, 'I'll be back!'

I returned to our room, threw myself on to the bed, and soon was fast asleep. I woke up some time later, read a little, then went outside to sit in the sun, overlooking the fine view, and read. As it became quite cool, I had to return to the room. Later I had a shower and wrote my diary.

Colm finally arrived back, having walked nearly sixteen miles all round the place. Although exhausted, he seemed very happy. He threw himself under the shower and changed his clothes. Afterwards we drove to the restaurant for a large and very satisfying meal. This evening I started with soup; although it was the same as what I had ordered on the previous evening, I now had it with two great chunks of corn bread made with buttermilk. Next came a salad with a dressing made with blue cheese. The main course consisted of grilled North Carolina country ham with a spiced apple ring, which was served with baked potato, carrots and a basket of biscuits (scones). The dessert consisted of freshly-baked 'cobbler' (a variety of pie or crumble) with blackberries and ice cream. As the country ham was so salty and the portion so big, I could only eat a little of it. As neither of us had space for the scones, we took them away in a cardboard box. We thanked the lady behind the desk after we had paid for the meal, and told her that the food we had eaten here was probably the best that we had eaten in America so far. She was very pleased to hear this.

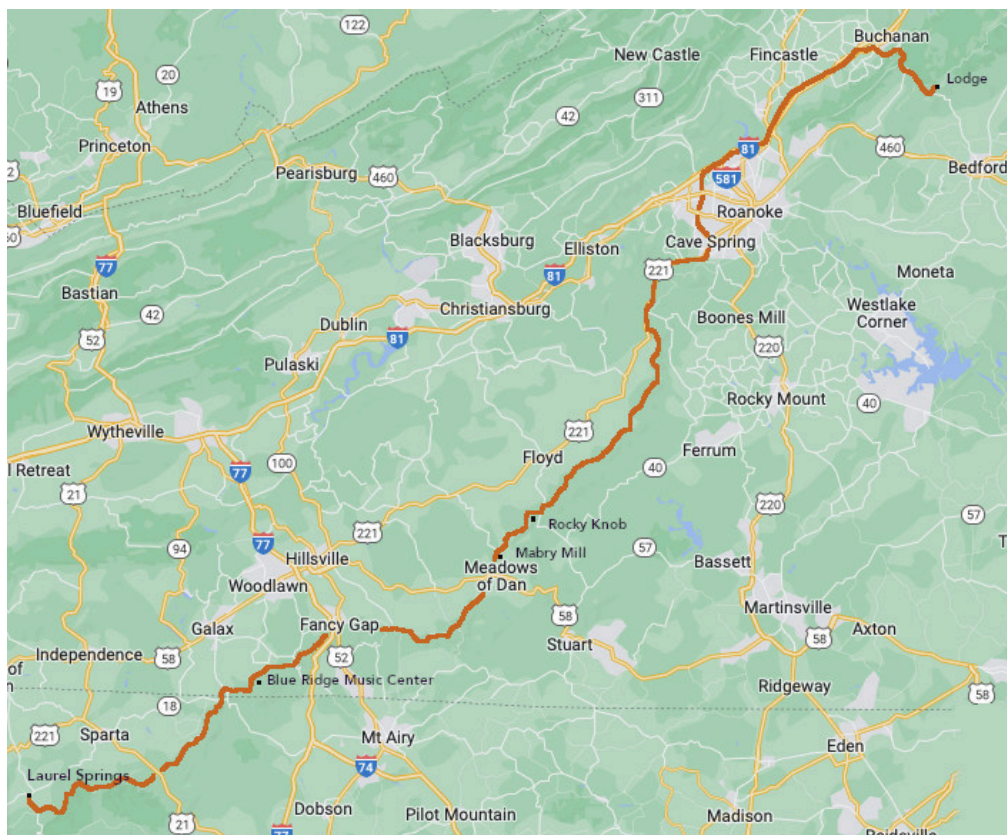
Colm drove back to the lodge on his own and I walked back as I had been lazing around for the entire afternoon. We spent the rest of the evening indoors. Colm was in his pyjamas by 8.30 p.m. When I joked with him that we were going to bed earlier and earlier, he said, 'We've gone native!'

Thursday, 18 May

Although it had been delightfully quiet, I had not slept particularly well during the night. We got up at about seven o'clock and were in the restaurant half an hour later, where I breakfasted on porridge, fried eggs, buttered toast and a scone left over from the previous evening's dinner. Afterwards we took a short walk up some little knolls that afforded a view of the lodge and the gorge that we had scrambled along on the previous day. We then walked a little way down another trail and returned to the lodge.

After we had checked out and set off at about ten o'clock, we drove northwards along the parkway and, after a little while, we left North Carolina and returned to Virginia. All of a sudden the weather deteriorated and it began to pour with rain. To escape from the downpour, we drove into the nearby Blue Ridge Music Center. This turned out to be quite interesting, for it contained an exhibition of photos of

local musicians from the 1920s onwards. Colm bought a CD of local folk music, issued by the National Geographic magazine, for a friend.



As it had stopped raining by the time we left, we were able to continue our journey in a leisurely manner, pausing to admire the views from various lay-bys, and finally stopped at Mabry Mill. A couple whom we had met earlier had recommended the place to us. This rustic corner of Virginia contained an old mill wheel and race, some charming wooden buildings, a still where 'moonshine' liquor had once been produced, and a collection of farm equipment. It reminded me of the famous *Skansen* in Stockholm, Sweden, which I had once visited. Later we adjourned to the restaurant, where we had a simple lunch of salad. In the gift shop afterwards I bought a handsome book on Virginia for myself.



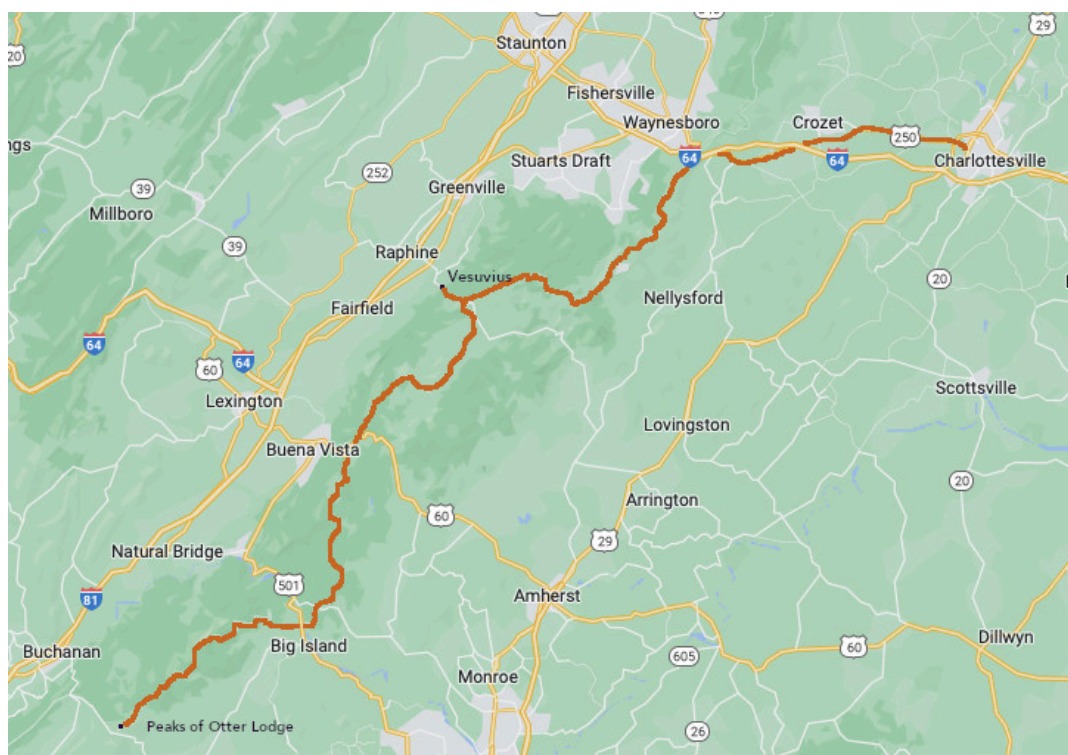
Mabry Mill, Virginia

From here we drove a short distance to the Rocky Knob visitor centre, where we had a snooze in the car, and then took a pleasant walk along a trail to the Rocky Knob, from where we enjoyed a good view of the surrounding countryside. By now the weather was clear and sunny.

However, as time was marching on and we needed to find accommodation, we set off once again. Passing more dramatic views of wooded mountains and steep valleys, we headed up towards Roanoke, though we were determined to avoid the city centre. As no motels could be found, we kept going and eventually stopped at the Peaks of Otter Lodge, which looked very welcoming, soon after 6.30 p.m. Fortunately we had no trouble booking a room.

After we had had showers, I sat out in the sunshine for a while and then we made our way to the dining room. We had an excellent meal of navy bean soup, catfish with vegetables, sweet potato fries and bread rolls, then a dessert of ice cream for me and pecan pie for Colm. I drank a glass of Chardonnay white wine with the meal.

Eventually we returned to our room, where we settled down for the remainder of the evening. It had been a very pleasant and rewarding day.



Friday, 19 May

Although I had slept solidly during the night, I had dreamt a lot of rubbish; no doubt it was due to the wine that I had drunk that evening. I was reluctant to get out of bed at seven o'clock this morning, even though it was a beautifully clear and sunny start to the day. We went to the dining room where, as the service was very slow once again, we had to wait half an hour before we were finally served. We had bowls of porridge that were given to us without milk, and I ate a variety of pancake that contained apple and cinnamon.

We left immediately after breakfast and resumed our journey northwards through Virginia. As the weather had suddenly deteriorated and had turned very cold, I was glad that I had bought a new fleece jacket in the gift shop before we left.

I wore it when we stopped and went for a walk to a dramatic waterfall. I only began to warm up when we climbed back up towards the parkway. Although there was some very fine scenery to be seen in this area, our enjoyment of it was marred by the poor weather and the grey clouds.

We next stopped at the James River (here a good deal narrower than at historic Jamestown) and crossed a footbridge to see it all the better. On the far side we found the remains of an old lock. As the restaurant at a visitor centre in the vicinity was closed, we had to continue driving, leave the parkway for Route 56, and stop in a village named Vesuvius, where we found a restaurant in a little grocery store. Here we had a rough-and-ready lunch of toasted ham and sauerkraut sandwiches served with French fries, followed by apple pie with ice cream. The lady in charge was very friendly and gave us markers so that we could write our names either on the walls or on the ceiling – there were people's names everywhere! I chose to be like Michelangelo and wrote our names, beside a depiction of a shamrock, on the ceiling. Before leaving, we bought chocolate and bottles of water.



The Blue Ridge Mountains, Virginia

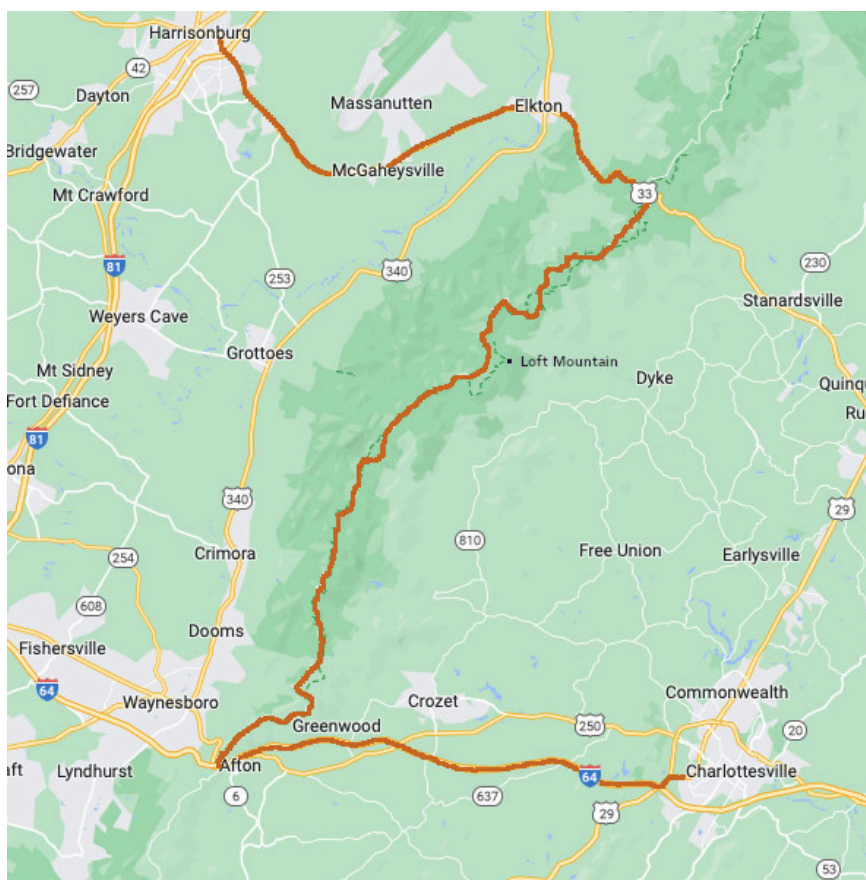
After Colm had driven along the winding uphill road to the parkway, I took over and off we went again. The sun now emerged from behind the clouds and so we were able to enjoy the highly dramatic scenery once again. We stopped at one of the viewing spots and snoozed for about half an hour.

Later we set off again and eventually came to the end of the Blue Ridge Parkway. We would resume our northwards journey along the Skyline Drive later. Taking Route 150, we now travelled eastwards towards Charlottesville, where we planned to visit Jefferson's house, Monticello. We soon reached the town and, following our map and the instructions in my guide book, found the Budget Inn without any bother. We were able to get a room for this evening but not for the following day; as Colm had hoped to attend Mass here on Saturday, we had planned to stay here for two nights. However, we made a decision to visit the university and see the city centre this evening, then visit Monticello on the following morning.

We therefore set off immediately and drove a short distance, past Jefferson's fine Rotunda building in the university, to the 'historic downtown' area. We parked the car and walked around some of the streets. Although there were a few historic

buildings and a mall that contained some good book and art shops, we were not very taken with the place. We therefore were not too sorry about having to leave after seeing Monticello on the following morning. We eventually found somewhere to eat – a dark and noisy pub – where I just ate a salad and drank iced tea.

Afterwards we walked across the road to a cinema (the former Jefferson theatre), where we saw the movie *King Kong* for just \$3. The cinema was very basic and rather old fashioned, and the projector broke down halfway through the film – an incident that caused a certain amount of amusement among the audience. Whatever had gone wrong was quickly fixed and off we went again. I quite enjoyed the film, which was well acted and quite funny. Afterwards we returned to our indifferent motel and settled down for the night. It felt strange to be back in a bustling city again; the streets were full of students as the following day would be graduation day.



Saturday, 20 May

We were awake soon after 6.30; it was a fine, bright morning. When ready, we walked across the road to a restaurant and had breakfast. Much to Colm's disappointment, there was no porridge to be had here. I ordered a large waffle with cooked blueberries and a bowlful of fruit, washed down with orange juice and then tea.

We then packed up our things, checked out, and set off in the car for Thomas Jefferson's famous house, Monticello, which we found easily enough in the outskirts of the city. As we arrived there by about 8.30 a.m., there were very few people about. Admission to the house and grounds cost us \$14 each, and we travelled in a small bus to the quite striking and unusual house. At the entrance we were met by a guide and welcomed. As I had read in my guide book, the house –

especially the hall – was full of various gadgets that Jefferson had designed or used.



Monticello, Charlottesville, Virginia

It turned out to be quite an interesting house; although large, the rooms were of modest dimensions and were simply decorated. Although the building was quite novel and cleverly designed, its contents proved to be far more interesting. In the hall was an unusual clock, the weights of which descended through the floorboards. We were shown the famous letter copier, a fine square piano, and a harpsichord made by Jacob Kirckman in 1762. The lady who told us all about the place was well informed and very interesting. We finished the tour in a guest bedroom, the walls of which were covered in wallpaper that Jefferson had purchased in France, and we were let out through the back door into the pretty garden. In the distance we could just about discern the rotunda of the famous university.



The plantation area of Monticello, Charlottesville, Virginia

We now ambled around the garden, admiring the beautiful flowers, looked at the vegetable garden, the plantation area and the servants' quarters, then made our

way down to the Jefferson family tomb, and from there to the car park. On the way we stopped at a gift shop, where Colm bought a mug and I purchased a box of interesting soaps made from old recipes. We got into conversation with a nice lady behind the counter, who told us many interesting facts about the area. Her companion, a tall man with long flowing hair, a moustache and small beard, looked remarkably like Oscar Wilde.

We left this interesting place at about 11 a.m., when it was beginning to get busy, and drove off. We got on to the Interstate 64 and made our way westwards to the beginning of the Shenandoah Skyline Drive (an extension of the Blue Ridge Parkway), where we had to pay \$15 to use the road. As it was such a beautiful day, the scenery along the road looked terrific. We stopped at several of the overlooks to admire the views, and finally came to a halt at the Loft Mountain information centre for some lunch. Before we went into the restaurant, we got into conversation with a middle-aged man with a huge backpack, sticks and all the gear, who was walking the entire length of the Appalachian Trail and more. He had started somewhere in Georgia back in March and planned to finish in Maine sometime in September.

After a simple meal in the fast food restaurant, we drove a little farther to the Ivy Creek overlook, then walked some of the trail. It was easy enough (though somewhat tiring in the heat), and we arrived back by about three o'clock.

Our next goal was to find a nearby church. As there was no hope of finding one here up in the mountains, we had to turn westwards along Route 33 towards Harrisonburg – a town that Colm decided that we must go to as his surname was incorporated in the name. En route we stopped in the village of Elkton, where we saw no signs of a Catholic church. There were plenty of other churches along the road – Baptist, Methodist, Protestant and so forth – but no Catholic ones.

When we finally approached Harrisonburg, we found a nice clean Econo Lodge, where we booked a room for the night. We then spruced ourselves up and, having been given some information, drove to the town centre, parked the car and found a Catholic church without any trouble at all. We arrived at ten to five – just in time. The Mass, during which I fell asleep, dragged on for over an hour, and included far too much music and hymn singing for my liking.

When it eventually finished, we left the church, ambled up and down the main street, looked at some fine old houses and buildings, then selected a Greek restaurant, where we enjoyed a good meal. I chose a bowl of lentil soup, a side salad, and a big dish of Greek-style lasagne, all washed down with a glass of nice rosé wine.

We then drove back to our motel. As it was still pleasant out, we checked the local restaurants for the following morning's breakfast, then wandered around a huge supermarket, where we bought bottles of water. We were horrified to discover a large glass cabinet containing guns in the middle of the shop; we could hardly believe that anyone could walk into a supermarket like this and buy such deadly weapons.

Back in the motel we settled down for the rest of the evening.